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Permissions and**ASCD EXPRESS****Succeeding with Superior Social Skills***Corinne Gregory*

Everyone has heard about the need to improve academic achievement, narrow the achievement gap for minority and low-income populations, and improve school safety and culture, among other "ills" plaguing our students' education. Generally the solutions proposed involve increasing funding for schools, adding more emphasis on academics, and hiring and retaining better qualified teachers and staff. But as we're trying to teach our students the traditional "3 Rs" (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic), it's the forgotten "Rs" that are hampering their academic and personal achievement the most.

The missing "Rs" (respect, responsibility, reliability, and resourcefulness) refer to social skills and positive character development and have been shown to be the most important factors in a child's personal and professional success—outranking academic achievement, socioeconomic status, or professional or personal connections. Traditionally, students learned these vital life skills outside of school, in the home and in their communities. Today, however, for myriad reasons, too many students come to school underprepared with those social skills and character foundations that help them succeed in the classroom environment. Further, this inadequacy continues and frequently worsens throughout their educational career, so that they are too often unprepared for the job market.

Disruptive students and inadequate classroom discipline are among the biggest problems facing education today. Bullying and other forms of school-based violence have reached frightening levels, leaving students, teachers, and staff feeling unsafe. Too many teachers leave the profession because of burnout and frustration with unruly students. Students cannot learn in an environment where more time is spent on classroom discipline and maintaining order and engagement than on teaching. And the students that suffer the most are often those traditionally left behind—minority students, English language learners, and those from lower economic populations, who often are not exposed to the social and emotional learning that is the expected cultural norm for the mainstream market.

When effective social skills education is brought into the classroom, everyone benefits. Students learn vital lessons about conduct and character, framed in a way that makes it clear about what's in it for them and why they should care about better behavior and values. Teachers can spend more time on productive teaching and students spend more time on task.

Bullying and other antisocial behaviors drop dramatically. And, not surprisingly, academic achievement improves. Students gain valuable skills and character traits that improve their immediate educational experience and outcomes, and more of them leave the school system feeling prepared for productive lives and careers.

Data also indicate that benefits to students appear to last long after the lessons are taught. A study released in December 2008 by the University of Washington shows that 15 years after students received intervention in social skills in elementary school, they have better mental health, improved educational development, and higher economic status. Another study published in October 2008 by the University of Illinois showed that students documented to have better social skills in high school were earning more 10 years later than students with equal test scores but lesser social skills.

There's more to a complete and adequate education than just book learning. In today's environment, we cannot afford to make a choice between academics and social skills—both must be taught in order to make education work.

Corinne Gregory is an education expert and author. She is the creator of the SocialSmarts™ program from The

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